

Rising COVID cases in Asia a warning for us

Bangladesh must take note and prepare

Amid a rise in infections caused by new sub-variants of the coronavirus in some neighbouring countries, Bangladesh's health ministry has advised citizens to refrain from travelling to India and other affected nations unless absolutely necessary. According to Indian media, the country recently reported over 6,000 COVID cases within a 24-hour period. So far in 2025, India has reported 65 COVID-related deaths. Similarly, in the last week of May, Thailand recorded 65,880 new COVID cases and three fatalities. The number of cases in other Asian countries, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, has also risen significantly.

In Bangladesh, although no significant surge in hospital admissions has been reported, health authorities have noted a slight uptick in flu-like symptoms and respiratory illnesses in urban areas. Experts have cautioned that low testing rates may be masking the true extent of community transmission, calling for enhanced monitoring.

With the World Health Organization announcing on May 28 that global SARS-CoV-2 activity has been increasing since February—reaching a test positivity rate of 11 percent, a level not seen since July 2024—and with cases rising in neighbouring regions, the time for caution has once again arrived. Although the world has somewhat adjusted to living with the virus, if the previous pandemic years have taught us anything, it is that overcoming COVID becomes easier with better preparedness.

Raising awareness, therefore, is key, but it must be matched by swift and coordinated action from the authorities. The government must ensure an adequate supply of test kits, medical equipment, and vaccines. Reportedly, COVID test kits are currently unavailable in government hospitals. According to sources at the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) under the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), there are currently 3.1 million vaccine doses in stock, of which 1.7 million will expire by August. All this suggests that our COVID preparedness is once again at a poor level.

Now that we know so much about the virus, there is really no excuse for failing to prevent another surge in COVID cases and fatalities. The government must ensure that adequate supplies are available at all public hospitals and health facilities. In addition, surveillance and risk communication activities must be strengthened at the International Health Regulations (IHR) desks in all land, sea, and airports for incoming travellers. The use of thermal scanners or digital handheld thermometers with non-contact techniques to measure body temperature must be ensured at all entry points, along with sufficient provision of masks, gloves, and personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers.

The DGHS has issued a set of guidelines to reduce the risk of contracting and transmitting the disease. Meanwhile, Dhaka metro rail authorities and the railway ministry have urged travellers to wear masks and abide by health guidelines. These infection prevention guidelines should continue to be disseminated to raise public awareness and help prevent the spread of the virus.

A crisis worsened by fund crunch

The Rohingya need global support to live properly

With the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar showing no signs of ending and the repatriation process in Bangladesh at a standstill, it is concerning that only 19 percent of the required fund for Rohingya refugees this year has been secured after the passing of five months. Reportedly, a total of \$934 million is needed to support 1.5 million people—1.2 million Rohingya and 300,000 members of the host community—but only \$180 million has been received. This gap, largely due to the suspension of US funding, will further strain conditions in the camps, making it harder for the refugees to access essential services such as education and healthcare. Dozens of projects, including those related to health, family planning, nutrition, and education, have already been affected by the cuts. Humanitarian organisations warn that the situation will further deteriorate unless funds are urgently released.

An example of the refugees' shrinking access to healthcare is that the number of general patients seeking treatment in camps dropped from 372,000 in February to 205,000 in April. Many are having to pay for doctors themselves in serious cases, which is not possible for everyone. The funding cut has also severely impacted education, putting the future of 230,000 Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar—and the livelihoods of hundreds of terminated teachers from the host community—at risk. Since these learning centres also serve as protection spaces for the children, their closure poses serious safety risks.

Moreover, the scarcity of shelter has worsened with the onset of the monsoon rains, which have already damaged many homes. It has become extremely difficult to provide shelter and basic services to the 150,000 Rohingya people who have fled to Bangladesh in recent months. According to a WFP update, 50,000 more may arrive by the end of the year, raising further concerns. Without access to basic services, refugees may flee the camps and embark on risky journeys to foreign lands in desperation. Criminal activities in and around the camps may also increase, and gender-based violence could rise, leaving victims without support or psychological counselling.

According to a UN official, there is only enough food to support the Rohingya until October, which is deeply alarming. Access to food, education, and healthcare is a fundamental human right and must not be denied. We urge the international community not to forget the plight of the Rohingya and to come forward with aid. The interim government, led by Professor Yunus, must leverage its capacity to secure necessary assistance from global sources. Additionally, the authorities must ensure that all aid received is utilised efficiently and without waste.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

'E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial' released

On this day in 1982, Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* was released in theatres, and it is widely seen as a classic of American cinema.

EDITORIAL

We need both new wine and a new bottle

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

The chief adviser has announced the timing of the next parliamentary election—the country will go to the polls, *ceteris paribus*, in the first half of April 2026. One would not be wrong to suggest that his hands were forced by the BNP demand to hold the election by December this year. Predictably, the announcement has not satisfied the BNP, who claim that they reflect the majority public opinion regarding the polls, and that the nation has been disappointed by the election schedule announced by the CA on the eve of Eid-ul-Azha.

We don't know whether the party has conducted a countrywide public opinion poll on which they posit their assertion. Going by the comments and observations in various media platforms, there are grounds to take issue with BNP's claims. In fact, one might go so far as to suggest that a large segment of the population is disappointed by the election schedule. And for good reasons.

Let me make it clear before proceeding further that there is no

I don't want to be coerced to vote for any particular party. I want money and muscle power to become irrelevant in politics. I want political leadership to emerge through a democratic process within the political party. I want that by the time that the next election is held, the law of primogeniture followed by our two major political parties, for so long, becomes history.

alternative to a democratically elected government. Needless to say, any government that is entrusted with the task of running the affairs of the state must have the confidence of the public. And the confidence is expressed through a free, fair and participatory election, which the last three elections under Sheikh Hasina did not allow. But there is yet another means by which the public entrusts a group of



Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, addressing the nation on the eve of Eid-ul-Azha, announced that the next general election of the country would be held in the first half of April in 2026.

SOURCE: CHIEF ADVISER GOB/FACEBOOK

people to conduct the affairs of the state, for a period of time, with the expectations that the aims, the hopes and aspirations, the shortcomings of democracy, the trampling of people's rights that led to the extraordinary manner of regime change—in our case an illegal regime—are fulfilled and the causal factors are purged forever. Such an arrangement certainly defies the narrative of political science literature, but nevertheless is lent credibility by the demonstration of public support, which may not have come through the ballot boxes, but through a public upheaval, as the July uprising of 2024 was. There can be nothing more powerful a popular verdict than what was pronounced on August 5, 2024.

We must not forget that the July uprising was a unique phenomenon, hardly witnessed anywhere else in the recent past. We must also not forget that the people have invested the interim government with the power to bring changes—albeit not through the ballot box, but perhaps more empowering and overwhelming than the ballot box—as deemed necessary to ensure that we don't suffer the pains we did in the 15-plus years of the previous regime. But of course, the changes must be done through consultations with other political parties who lost their say during this long one and a

far been able to weather the persistent media onslaught from across the border which has made Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus the main target.

Why has the election schedule been disappointing to most people?

The simple answer is most people are worried about our future. Worried that the objective of the Monsoon Revolution may perhaps not be fulfilled. Worried because the pious hope for a systemic change that would prevent the repetition of the past regime's misdeeds may not come about. People don't want to see the old wine in an old bottle—politics being hogged by time tested politicians who have failed people's expectations time and again. Each successive election brought one of the two political parties that outdid the previous regime in maladministration, in financial mismanagement, in crony capitalism, and what have you. Why do you think the Awami League could cling to power despite its blatant misdeeds and violation of human rights, on which the UN has also given its verdict? Other than the three farcical elections, one reason was that the binary alternative, in public estimation, was no better an option.

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In short, the call is: Reform, then elect.

reforms have regrettably not been thrashed out, consensus reached and made ready for implementation. The call is for essential reforms.

And what do I want as a common voter? I am confident that I speak more than for myself only.

I don't want to be coerced to vote for any particular party. I want money and muscle power to become irrelevant in politics. I want political leadership to emerge through a democratic process within the political party. I want that by the time that the next election is held, the law of primogeniture followed by our two major political parties, for so long, becomes history. That the sanitised system ensures a balance of power and separation of the branches of the government, providing guard rails of democracy that would prevent descent to authoritarian rule and foil the prospect of a single individual assuming superlative power. That the security and law enforcement agencies don't become appendages of the ruling party. That there should be a stonewall between the party in power and the administration.

A tall order, perhaps, but very essential.

We don't want old wine in a new bottle, we want both new wine and a new bottle.

The curious case of the *déjà flu*

MIND THE GAP

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Some people get back together with their ex. Others get back on the medicinal health crisis bandwagon. Bangladesh, shockingly, chose the latter (the ex has been more than blocked—it's been banned, to be fair).

But yes, COVID is rising again, slowly, stealthily. Hospital admissions are creeping up, whispers of "complications" are floating around, and somewhere deep inside the health ministry, someone has just re-Googled, "What is the difference between coronavirus and flu virus?"

This, of course, is not our first viral rodeo. We've done this dance before, complete with mask mandates, panic induced grocery shortages, and that unforgettable cameo by our former health minister, who somehow managed to combine the calm of a stampede with the clarity of expired cough syrup (read sarcasm, please).

He may not have cured COVID, but he did cure the nation of taking him seriously.

Now, here we are again. One foot in flu season, the other in full-blown *déjà flu*.

To be fair, the virus isn't back with the same drama. No lockdowns (yet),

no sirens, no daily death tolls scrolling across your TV like the credits of a horror film. It's more of a soft launch, the dinner table story featuring only your hands, not the face. Like an indie sequel to a blockbuster we all hated but secretly watched out for, given morbid curiosity.

And what are we doing to prepare? Mostly, recycling habits. Masks are back—on chins, only "maskne." Sanitiser is back—in theory. And of course, we're back to hoping that this time, the government's response won't involve mysterious medical procurement deals and YouTube doctors suggesting turmeric as an immune booster.

But there is one noticeable change. This time, people are... tired. Bone-deep, eye-roll-heavy, can-we-just-not-tired. We've seen the plot twists. We know how this goes. The rising numbers, the vague press briefings, the dramatic declaration of "urgent precautions" that somehow translates into a fogging machine and a photo-op.

For every Millennial reader, I see you, I hear you; it's just exhausting, I know. Half our 20s was eaten whole

by pandemic, panic, lockdowns, recession, blackouts, protests, politics and the incredible doomscrolling of war memes (you know which). We just low-key want a fair shot at life without this dystopian world getting in the way.

And yet, bizarrely, no one seems to be steering the ship. You know that moment at a wedding when the power goes out, the mic squeals, and

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everyone looks around pretending it's part of the programme because they're still not done with their firmi? That's where we are now. Except instead of power failure, it's health preparedness. And instead of a mic, it's a nation-sized throat-clearing.

But here's the thing: we've been gifted a second chance. A re-run with spoilers. We already know what not to do—like announcing that infections are under control when we haven't tested anyone, or putting a committee together with the same efficiency one

might use to assemble IKEA furniture without the manual.

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Let's try something totally out of the box and totally novel. Let's learn from our mistakes. Let's assume that a virus does not, in fact, care about election timelines, district boundaries, floods, or whether we have an opening ceremony planned for a new overpass. Let's assume that health—drumroll, please!—matters.

And while we're at it, maybe we, the public, can do better too. No more licking ice cream in air-conditioned malls and announcing, "I don't believe in viruses," like it's a zodiac sign. No more WhatsApp forwards claiming ginger can cure variants. Just sensible decisions, a little less bravado, and a bit more brain.

COVID was never gone. It just went offline for updates. And if we've learnt anything at all in the last few years, it's that viruses don't wait for permission. They arrive uninvited and leave behind invoices.

So, this time, let's send them straight to voicemail. Let's not be the nation that fails twice in the same exam. Let's not look back in six months and say, "We should have seen this coming." Because we did. We've already watched this movie. We know how it ends. Let's just hope, for once, we don't trip over the same plot hole.